Strategy use of children with Down syndrome in a delay of gratification situation

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Background: The capacity to delay gratification has been shown to be a very important developmental task for children who are developing typically. There is evidence that children with Down syndrome have more difficulty with a delay of gratification task than typically developing children of the same mental age. This study focused on the strategies children with Down syndrome use while in a delay of gratification situation to ascertain if these contribute to the differences in delay times from those of typically developing children.

Method: Thirty-two children with Down syndrome (15 females) and 50 typically developing children participated in the study. Children with Down syndrome had a mental age, as measured by the Stanford-Binet IV, between 36 and 66 months (M = 45.66). The typically developing children had a mean chronological age of 45.76 months. Children participated in a delay of gratification task where they were offered two or one small treats and asked which they preferred. They were then told that they could have the two treats if they waited for the researcher to return (an undisclosed time of 15 min). If they did not want to wait any longer they could call the researcher back but then they could have only one treat. Twenty-two of the children with Down syndrome and 43 of the typically developing children demonstrated understanding of the task and their data are included here. Sessions were videotaped for later analysis.

Results: There were significant differences in the mean waiting times of the two groups. The mean of the waiting times for children with Down syndrome was 181.32 s (SD = 347.62) and was 440.21 s (SD = 377.59) for the typically developing children. Eighteen percent of the group with Down syndrome waited for the researcher to return in comparison to 35% of the typically developing group. Sixty-four percent of children with Down syndrome called the researcher back and the remainder (18%) violated. In the typically developing group 37% called the researcher back and 28% violated. The mean waiting time for the group of children with Down syndrome who called the researcher back was 24 s. Examination of strategy use in this group was therefore very limited. There appeared to be quite similar strategy use across the groups who waited the full 15 min.

Conclusions: These results confirm the difficulty children with Down syndrome have in delaying gratification. Teaching strategies for waiting, using information drawn from the behaviours of children who are developing typically may be a useful undertaking. Examination of other contributors to delay ability (e.g., language skills) is also likely to be helpful in understanding the difficulties demonstrated in delaying gratification.

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